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STATE FOR NEA/ELA AND EEB  
BAGHDAD FOR D. MARTINO AND D. OROCHENA

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN AIR CHARTER COMPANY BEGINS SERVICE TO IRAQ'S  
NAJAF AIRPORT

11. (U) Jordan Aviation (JA), Jordan's largest charter airline, flew a test flight to Najaf in southern Iraq on December 6 and began charter service to Najaf International Airport on December 12. According to press reports, JA Chairman Captain Mohammed Al-Khashman said that JA will dedicate three planes to serving Najaf, a destination for an estimated 3 million, primarily Shi'a, pilgrims annually.

12. (U) JA was founded in 1998 and operates 18 commercial aircraft including Boeing 737s and 767s and Airbus A310s and A320s with a primary base in Aqaba. JA plans to grow to 30 aircraft and 2000 employees in 2009. JA provides charter flights to Baghdad and has transported 65,000 Iraqis on the hajj over the past three years, including 24,000 in 2008. JA is Jordan's second largest aviation company after Royal Jordanian and is also active in aviation leasing.

13. (U) Al-Khashman spoke on November 23, at the First International Transport Conference and Exhibition in the Dead Sea on aviation challenges and opportunities. While lamenting the impact of the recession on air travel, he said that a 60 percent reduction in fuel costs over the past 3 months was good for the sector. He said transportation relies heavily on public-private partnerships and credited the GOJ with significant investments in airports in Amman, the Jordan valley, and in the Mafrak economic zone. He also said that Jordan, with its good location and political stability, will benefit greatly from the rapid growth in aviation in the Middle East.

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